

## ***Sermon***

### ***Fiercely Devoted***

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

October 23, 2022

Our Old Testament scripture is from the little known prophet Joel. This tiny book in the Bible rarely shows up in the lectionary and likely most pastors would skip it, but for me, it spoke to me and I'll see if you can sense where the Holy Spirit is leading us through our scripture today.

We don't know a lot about Joel so I can't really tell you what kind of a prophet he was or what his background might have been. This text belongs to the genre of apocalyptic, in which the prophet speaks a word of hope and salvation to the people in the midst of great suffering. The book begins with an invasion of locusts. Now, I don't know and really can't imagine what kind of terror it must be to witness either the invasion itself or the aftermath of an invasion of a horrible insect that attacks your only food source but it sounds like a horror movie. Joel interprets this invasion both as a sign of God's judgment but also the coming vindication for the children of Zion, who are God's own.

In our world today, the state the Israelites find themselves in reminds me of the great natural disasters such as the recent hurricanes, droughts and terrible wild fires we see flooding our TV screens. The aftermath from these events will be felt for years if not for generations to come. My mind looks to the war in Ukraine, the Middle East conflicts and other man-made destruction that leaves human and earthly carnage in their paths. Piles of rubble, buildings half gone, mass graves and lives lost – both human and animal. The natural habitats of

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<sup>1</sup>Excerpt from [www.faustgallery.com](http://www.faustgallery.com), "Mature's Role in American Indian Culture.

Inspired by [Feasting on the Word, Year C](#) commentary on Joel 2:23-32 by Pamela Cooper-White and commentary on Luke 18:9-14 by Laura A. Sugg.

animals that are destroyed such as the wild fires in Australia just a couple of years ago where scorched and burned Koala bears were being saved by people trying to help them as their homes and food source, much like the locusts, perished around them.

I am always amazed watching these events unfold that when you return years later, buildings have been repaired or replaced and the Earth, be it seemingly impossible, seems to be able to rejuvenate and recover, though as we know, in some circumstances damage is more permanent.

Joel provides a glimpse into the mind of God in the hopes that what has transpired won't be missed by the people who were most affected. Have you ever known someone who has created disaster in their own lives yet continue to cry missing that they inflicted much of their pain upon themselves? Joel is attempting to avoid this for the people by helping them see that this situation they find themselves in – well, they caused it.

The Dustbowl that occurred during the Great Depression in the early 1930s was a result of an influx of new farmers into the mid-west in a normally arid area who began plowing fields to grow wheat which had a high demand prior to the depression. Unfortunately in that process they plowed over the natural grasslands, something nature had created to hold the dry soil during natural windy seasons. When wheat prices dropped, they plowed more fields to plant more wheat. With the dryness of the land, crops did not flourish and these settlers were forced to move to the west. Leaving these now barren fields, they became dust and the winds created these huge dust storms that made it near impossible to live in the region and many people succumb to the conditions.

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God has provided us with many cues as to what the Earth can tolerate from us and despite our stubbornness has remarkably provided us with a planet that has forgiven us time and time again. But at what point does this planet become fully engulfed in locusts or simply turn into one giant dustbowl, an inhabitable place for animals and humans? When do we as its tenants say enough is enough...Dear Lord, we hear your plea.

Joel comes with good tidings in our passage..."I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied...my people shall never again be put to shame." And you know, we have not. We are putting ourselves to shame now.

<sup>1</sup>Nature plays a very important role in American Indian Culture. The importance of nature in Native American culture is a widely noted fact. The natural world permeates all aspects of American Indian life – religion, daily rituals, mythology, writings, food, medicine, art and so much more. Their way of life goes hand in hand with the land and environment. American Indian culture respects nature above all else. The concept is significantly intertwined with the society's beliefs regarding spirituality, both of which act as vital defining aspects of their understanding and way of life. Native Americans operate under the conviction that all objects and elements of the earth – both living and nonliving – have an individual spirit that is part of the greater soul of the universe. This principle adheres to a religion called Animism, which is categorized by the belief in and worship of this overarching spirituality.

<sup>1</sup>Features of nature are symbolic and multi-functional in the American Indian universe making them valuable and pervasive in everything they practice

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and cultivate. Trees, for example, represent more than just a source of life and healing; their spirit emanates permanence and longevity. Animal spirit is another form through which nature weaves itself. Individuals often have a particular animal whose spirit they connect with – a guide that shapes who they are and how they live. To Native American culture, nature is the foundational anchor off of which all life and spirit is built.

Adopting some of the philosophy of these beliefs would indeed be our way of redemption to God...not from God, but to God. As we move forward both individually and as a church, perhaps we can consider how our decisions will affect the planet... Green energy choices, recycling, and educating ourselves on what kind of a carbon footprint we are leaving on the planet – both individually and as a church.

Oh I know what you're thinking...it's not me, it's not us...I am responsible, we do make good choices. It's not us – it's them. "Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." - Our Gospel today from Luke. When we look at how we live – the choices we make (and I include my own bad choices in this commentary), are you a Pharisee or a tax collector? It's hard to read this passage without placing ourselves in one role or the other. Come on, admit it...when you're watching the evening news or when you hear about someone whose maybe not living an "upstanding life" according to our culture, you don't have a moment of self-satisfaction...I am here on Sunday mornings – I serve on church committees, I volunteer, I donate. For me, I must admit, it is only when I mess up in a big way that I gain the humility of the tax collector. Major mistakes – hitting rock bottom

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as some in recovery programs call it – tend to be when that guy shows up. I hate to think of myself as that self-righteous Pharisee but I’m not being honest if I haven’t felt it, if not expressed it, at times. Yet, in our parable today and in so many other teachings of Christ, it is clear that God reaches out in mercy to the helpless.

If you talk with someone who has found sobriety, there is never a doubt that the tax payer showed up. Their humility is at the center of their sobriety believing that God can, when asked and will redeem. Jesus challenges believers to avoid trusting in our own efforts at fulfilling the law and, rather to humble ourselves before a merciful and loving God. To trust in God’s mercy.

Coupling this message with our Old Testament scripture is a bit of a challenge but what there is here is balance. The balance between humbling ourselves to God and to creation – such as the Native Americans have done – and upholding God’s law. We humble ourselves before a loving God confident in the Lord’s promises. We have been provided warnings of what are self-righteous choices are doing to creation, to ourselves and to animals. Locusts, of sorts, are still a threat to us – thought typically today in different forms like natural disasters and modern warfare...and God is still merciful.

No matter who...tax collector or Pharisee by nature, we are still welcome in God’s temple, fiercely devoted to serving God and creation...one good decision at a time.

Amen

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